Authoritarianism and the Emergence of Parallel State Dynamics: Evidence from the Syrian Earthquake

Dr Rahaf Aldoughli

r.aldoughli@lancaster.ac.uk

Lecturer at Lancaster University, Department of Politics, Philosophy and Religion

Bailrigg, Lancaster LA1 4YW

UK

Abstract

This article investigates the Syrian regime's strategic manipulation of the February 2023 earthquake to reaffirm its authority and maintain legitimacy. The regime's response to the disaster is analyzed to understand how authoritarian states leverage natural disasters for political gains. It argues that the Assad regime's survival is not merely about governance capabilities but about extending its infrastructural power and political decisions through co-opted civil society organizations. The earthquake highlighted the regime's fragile crisis management capabilities and its reliance on entities like the Syrian Trust for Development (STD) and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), which function as quasi-state apparatuses. These organizations, under the guise of civil society, operate as extensions of state power, embodying a "parallel state" structure. Using theoretical frameworks from scholars like Beshara and Gramsci, the article explores the regime's tactics of control, hegemony, and parallelization. It critically examines the blurred lines between state and civil society, emphasizing the regime's manipulation of international aid and the consolidation of its authority in the aftermath of the earthquake. This study contributes to the broader conversation on authoritarian durability, highlighting the complex interactions between state apparatuses and civil society in times of crisis.

Keywords: Syria Earthquake, hegemony, civil society, parallel state

Introduction

Since the formation of the modern Syrian state, the Baathist regime has consistently sought to maintain legitimacy and exert hegemony over its heterogeneous subjects. The regime institutionalized its authoritarian rule through social contracts that persisted until 2011. Understanding the Syrian conflict solely as a proxy war involving various regional and international actors overlooks the significant role of the Baathist regime's ideational strategies in maintaining authority and legitimacy. Scholars have extensively examined the Baathist regime's survival strategies, focusing on mechanisms of co-optation, confrontation, and securitization of perceived opponents (Aldoughli 2020; 2021a; 2024a; Dukhan 2019; Wedeen 2019). The 2023 earthquake has introduced a unique crisis of legitimacy, presenting an unprecedented challenge to the regime. To comprehensively understand how the regime has sustained its survival, it is essential to analyze not only the military, political, and economic dimensions of the Syrian conflict but also the regime's durable authoritarian strategies, particularly its adaptations of existing power structures such as civil society organizations (CSOs).

Natural disasters have long been associated with political transformations. In democratic or semi-democratic societies, the state's effective and timely response, or lack thereof, to natural disasters can have a tremendous impact on subsequent electoral outcomes (Carlin et al 2013, 5). In authoritarian states, disasters may serve to shore up loyalism as people turn to the regime for security and aid, or alternatively they may incite opposition if the regime is perceived as failing to provide an effective response (Bellin 2004, 142; Desai and Yousef 2007; Albrecht 2017; Aldoughli 2024b). Some researchers have argued that disasters tend to herald a turn toward

authoritarianism and securitization (Albrecht 2017). In other cases, however, disasters can strengthen support for civic society and reduce ingroup/outgroup polarization as people come together to respond (Agren 2017). The extent to which natural disasters are met with a pro-democratic public response may well depend on whether aid efforts are conducted in an egalitarian spirit or whether they flow through the all-powerful hands of the ruling government. As such, the way states respond to natural disasters illuminates not only its governance capacity, but it unravels the complex web of its interactions with communities, civic organizations, and adaptations of political strategies.

In recent decades, the Syrian regime has securitized all community and civil society initiatives (Aldoughli 2021b), except those it has co-opted or benefited from directly. In attempting to understand the relationship between the Baathist state and CSOs in Syria, it is important to note that this has pursued different historical trajectories, ranging from confrontation to co-optation (Hinnebusch 1993, 240). However, despite the importance of previous scholarship on regime's coercion and co-optation of CSOs, this article's point of departure lies in updating the spectrum of state-civil society relationship ranging from confrontation to co-optation. I argue that in post-2023 earthquake, the new state-civil society spectrum is parallelization. To mark the regime's adaptation strategies in its exploitation of the earthquake, I argue that the Baathist regime has relied on constructing a parallel state to sustain its authoritarian rule and ensures legitimacy. Here the February 2023 earthquake in Syria highlighted the internal complexities of the authoritarian regime and the fragility of its governmental agencies as crisis responders. This appropriation of state-civil society boundaries

highlights not only the blurred lines between the two, but the ultimate parallelization by the CS sector of the regime's governance capacity. This article asks the following primary question:

- How do authoritarian regimes leverage natural disasters to consolidate authority and reposition itself with civil society organizations?

In Syria's case, the regime's response during the disaster was notably inadequate. Consequently, organizations like the Syria Trust for Development (STD) and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) have emerged as quasi-state entities, operating under the guise of non-governmental organizations. As such, the recent earthquake underscores not only the state's fragility in disaster response but also the evolution of co-opted civil organizations into a parallel state structure. I define a 'parallel state' as a configuration of autonomous, formalized structures where the regime's authority is synonymized and embodied within ostensibly CSOs. This means that while these organizations appear independent, they function in alignment with and reinforce the regime's control, effectively acting as extensions of state power under the guise of civil society.

This article conceptualizes the earthquake as a transformational and dynamic determinant in revealing the durability of authoritarian regimes, which adapt their strategies to maintain legitimacy and survival. It extends the conversation on authoritarian durability by arguing that the survival of authoritarianism is not solely about whether these states are capable or incapable of effective governance (Slater and Fenner 2011, 15). Instead, it posits that when regime apparatuses exhibit substantial infrastructural power and extend their political decisions throughout this politicized realm, the regimes benefit most directly (Mann 1993, 5). This argument is grounded in Dan Slater's and Sofia Fenner's conceptualizations of the postcolonial

state, which suggest that a 'strong state is the best historical foundation for a durable authoritarian regime, not vice versa' (2011, 16).

This situation raises critical questions about the evolution of authoritarian strategies and the transformation of civil society organizations into parallel state structures in response to natural disasters. Specifically, what does the recent earthquake reveal about the regime's strategies in solidifying authority, control, and manipulation of international aid through '*civil society"*? To address these questions, this article is divided into two parts. The first part provides a detailed analysis of how the regime leveraged the natural disaster to reaffirm its authority and legitimacy by focusing on its official discourse. This section highlights that authoritarianism relies not only on direct violence but also on ideological manipulation and fostering a siege mentality among the population. The second part contests the term civil society and its meaning in an authoritarian context, adopting Beshara's (2012) and Gramsci's (1971) conceptualizations of the relationship between the state and civil society—whether it is a matter of control or hegemony. It then introduces the concept of a parallel state in the Syrian context, providing a detailed analysis of how the regime, utilizing the STD and the SARC, transcended hegemoniz*ing* civil society structures into constructing them as a *parallel* state.

Leveraging a Natural Disaster to Reaffirm Authority and Legitimacy

In February of 2023 a devastating earthquake struck Turkey and Syria. Measuring 7.8 on the Richter scale, it left more than 50,000 dead and caused tremendous economic losses (*Al Jazeera* 2023*)*. The repercussions of this disaster quickly came to include political impacts in addition to

the humanitarian and economic dimensions. Even prior to the earthquake, Syrians were suffering from a severe economic crisis and a harsh deterioration in living conditions after more than 12 years of civil war. In areas controlled by the regime, where an estimated 6 million people were affected by the earthquake, 1,414 were reportedly killed and 2,357 others were injured (Al-Baath 2023). The impact on infrastructure was severe, affecting health facilities, schools, and essential services such as power, communication, and water networks (Spuntik 2023; WBG 2023). The situation was especially dire for the population living in rebel-held regions in north-western Syria. In these areas, the earthquake hit hardest, affecting 148 cities and towns, including seven major cities with a total population of 374,514 (Aid Coordination Unit 2023). The natural disaster led to a staggering death toll of more than 4,500 and left over 8,700 individuals injured. Furthermore, the earthquake left thousands of people homeless, as it partially or completely destroyed more than 10,600 buildings (OCHA 2023).

Authoritarianism does not rely exclusively, or even primarily, on direct violence. It draws its strength from ideological components and the manipulation of human fears and aspirations as a form of passive hegemony (Daher 2018). One social feature that is common in authoritarian regimes is the perpetuation of a "siege mentality," defined as a belief that the national in-group is being targeted or preyed upon by other groups (Bar-Tal 1986, 35; Leeuwen 2008, 107). The rhetorical response of President Bashar al-Assad to the earthquake was in similar vein—he conveyed to Syrians that the international community was against them, intending to exacerbate their suffering. In a televised speech given shortly after the earthquake, for example, al-Assad absolved the regime from any responsibility to care for the victims or coordinate a coherent material response. Instead, al-Assad focused on the supposedly insufficient international response.

Using emotionally charged nationalist rhetoric, the majority of the 13-minute speech was devoted to emphasizing "love for the homeland" and the importance of political loyalty and solidarity in times of disasters. Furthermore, al-Assad indirectly insinuated that the opposition was hindering the delivery of aid to earthquake victims, stating that “this war has exhausted many national resources,” and that, “we will face [such outcomes] for months and years to come, in terms of services and economic and social challenges” (Assad 2023; see also Aldoughli 2021a).

To the extent that the regime did channel assistance to affected Syrians, it sought to ensure that such aid would flow to regime-held affected regions. When President al-Assad visited Aleppo and Latakia governorates, he made vague promises that the state would establish a fund to support those affected, but this included no specific criteria for who would receive support, no specific funding amounts, and no clear mechanism for distributing the aid. In spite of that, state institutions made little efforts to provide support for the earthquake victims. At the time of the current writing in April of 2023, no such state funds have yet materialized. Instead, the relevant ministries have been directed to “coordinate” response efforts with civil society entities and volunteers, which essentially means that Syrians have been left to fend for themselves without meaningful government assistance. The main efforts undertaken so far by the state in affected areas seem to be related to the demolition of buildings. Arguably, the regime sought to attribute the scale of this wartime destruction to the consequences of the earthquake. This can be seen in the vague and conflicting damage reports emerging from different agencies and actors. for example, the governor of Latakia has announced that the total number of earthquake-damaged buildings in the province exceeds an improbable 100,000,000, while the commander of the Syrian Civil Defense, known as the “White Helmets”, stated that the number of collapsed buildings in Latakia province was just

65 (*Al-Masry Al-Youm* 2023; *Al-Jazeera* 2023a). Equally implausible, the governor of Aleppo assed the earthquake's damage by stating that, "[buildings] in the west of Aleppo have remained intact, while the threatened and cracked buildings are located in the east of the city" (*Al-Watan* 2023). The eastern areas of Aleppo have been subjected to extremely heavy bombing by regime forces during the war, and combat-damaged buildings there have been collapsing for quite some time prior to the earthquake, often with inhabitants inside (*Syrian Snack* 2023).[i] In the weeks after the earthquake, targeted demolition efforts levelled large swathes of these combat-damaged areas Aleppo, leaving numerous people homeless—a pattern that was repeated in the Douma and Harasta areas of Damascus (*New Arab* 2023; *Sana News* 2023a; *Global* 2023*; Damascus Time* 2023).

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster official regime statements did not make a reference to rebel-held affected areas in Syria. For example, an official cabinet statement dated 6 February 2023, the day of the earthquake, described only the governorates of Aleppo, Hama, and Latakia as the most affected and in need of aid (*SANA News* 2023b). On the same day, however, a press release by Syria's National Seismological Center stated that, "Idlib [a rebel-held region] is one of the most affected areas" (*SANA News* 2023c). When asked on the following day about aid needs in areas outside of the regime control, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Faisal Mekdad, stated that, "Humanitarian aid sent through humanitarian corridors goes to terrorist groups, not innocent citizens" (Mekdad 2023). In other words, the regime refused to channel aid through established humanitarian corridors to rebel-controlled territories, under the justification that such supplies would benefit what it described as "terrorist groups" (ibid). Mekdad made a demand for the broad international sanctions on Syria to be lifted. He proposed that in exchange for lifting the sanctions,

the regime would allow aid groups to access rebel-held territories. In the same interview, Mekdad demanded that the broad international sanctions on Syrian must be lifted in exchange for the regime allowing aid groups to access opposition territories. This call was rapidly joined by other voices, including the SARC, which issued a Tweet in English on 7 February calling, for the lifting of sanctions (*SARC* Tweet 2023). Ultimately, the United States caved to this pressure and agreed on 10 February to suspend some of its sanctions on Syria for a period of six months (*Al-Arabiyya* 2023). The response from the regime was frosty, perhaps because it undermined the regime's strategy of blaming external factors for the Syria's devastation. A few hours after the U.S. decision to suspend its sanctions was issued, the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates released a statement indicating that, "The misleading decision issued by the U.S. administration regarding the partial and temporary freezing of some of the deadly and unilateral coercive measures imposed on the Syrian people is nothing more than a copy of previous sham decisions that seek to give a false humanitarian impression" (*Russia Today* 2023). Nonetheless, later that day the regime finally declared that Idlib was also a disaster area, and confirmed the arrival of aid there through the work of the International Red Cross and the Syrian Red Crescent (*SANA News* 2023d).

The regime's response to this natural disaster may well be regarded as a travesty, and as a cynical attempt to leverage Syrian's suffering to reaffirm its authority and legitimacy. This fact has not discouraged numerous international actors from falling into the trap of deferring to the regime's legitimacy in Syria. Shortly after the earthquake, al-Assad began to receive calls and telegrams of condolences from various heads of state, along with offers of aid. Russia's leader, Vladimir Putin, was one of the first to reach out to Assad, but he was quickly followed by representatives from Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, Iran, Algeria, Palestine,

Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Mauritania, China, Armenia, Lebanon, the World Health Organization, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, among others (Table 1; *SANA News* 2023e). These responses reflexively positioned Assad as the legitimate leader of Syria, and his regime as the natural conduit for humanitarian aid efforts. Leaping at the implications, the regime turned the official Website of the Syrian presidency into a platform to showcase these messages, apparently devoting more attention to counting and displaying such recognitions than to actually doing anything for the devastated Syrian populace. As such, Assad once again played the sympathies of the international community, and its default tendency to defer to the trappings of authority, however brutally obtained, as a means of shoring up the regime's legitimacy.

However, such principles can founder on the realpolitik of international tensions, which has been the case for aid in Syria since Russia decided to intervene in the civil war on behalf of the Assad regime in 2015. This military involvement served to prolong the war and enable Assad's atrocities against civilians, and it also played a major role in disrupting the international aid response (Phillips 2022). Up until December of 2019, international humanitarian aid continued to regularly enter Syria without the need for the regime's approval, including aid to areas outside of the regime's control via northern border crossings. The UN Security Council's support for such aid was curtailed in 2019 through a Russian and Chinese veto (*Syrian Network for Human Rights* 2020). Over the following year, additional Security Council decisions, operating under a constant veto threat, first reduced the number of humanitarian aid corridors from four to two, and then only to one, while helping to ensure that the Assad regime would maintain oversight of the single remaining border crossing for aid delivery (the crossing at Bab al-Hawa). In addition, new Security

Council resolutions in 2020 specified that approval for aid to Syria was only valid for a 6-month period, after which it has to be re-evaluated and extended for another 6 months, creating a climate of persistent logistical uncertainty for aid providers (*UN News* 2020).

Parallel State Structures: The Contestation of Civil Society vs State

The term 'civil society' lacks a precise definition among scholars, with varying interpretations encompassing non-profit organizations, social movements, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and smaller associations. Some scholars view the lack of consensus on defining civil society as one of its 'attractions,' arguing that its usage by diverse political groups creates a common platform for developing ideas, projects, and policy proposals (Kaldor 2003, 110). Despite this lack of consensus, a shared understanding persists: civil society is distinct from the state, operating autonomously. Whether viewed as confronting the state or working in tandem with it, as in some neo-liberal frameworks, civil society actors are consistently described as operating outside the state's domain (Dagnino 2011).

Volkhart F. Heinrich provides a comprehensive overview of civil society literature, identifying two predominant approaches within empirical research: the structural and the cultural. He underscores the complexity of establishing clear rules for which entities and actions belong to civil society, given its central position at the intersection of the state, family, and market (2005, 215-17). In this context, Michael Edwards asserts that civil society illuminates the evolving nature of human relationships by providing frameworks and spaces where individuals' agency and imagination can converge to address critical issues (2011, 95f). Jan Art Scholte

maintains that while civil society arenas cannot be entirely separated from official and commercial spheres, true civil society associations do not seek public office or financial gain (2004, 218). Jean L.Cohen and Andrew Arato argue that CSOs represent a normative model of a societal realm distinct from the state and the economy (1992, 362).

In the Syrian context, however, the boundaries between civil society and the regime are confluent. The primary issue is not merely distinguishing between the state (and family and market) and civil society, even with overlapping or fuzzy boundaries. Instead, it concerns the specificity of the Syrian regime as a hegemonic body that coerces and manipulates international aid to maintain survival and legitimacy. The exceptionalism of authoritarianism in Syria lies not only in the lack of autonomy of CSOs but also in their parallel existence with the state apparatus. The binary conception of state and civil society is based on a narrow definition of the state, perceived as the legislative and executive bodies governing society: the judiciary, government, parliament, police, and military. However, the term "governance," particularly global governance, as discussed by Scholte (2010), suggests a broader and more complex notion. Governance encompasses a range of governing apparatuses—private, public, or public-private partnerships—that create and control rules and regulations for markets, communication, the environment, border controls, the military, financial transactions, etc. Understanding the shift from government to governance as engendering a polycentric organization of interacting governing bodies is essential (p.462). In this context, civil society is perceived as a system-changing force and, not as a solidifying tool of the existing democratic system that acts as a regulator against state intrusions into the private and public realms (Eder 2009, 25). The conceptions of civil society—whether normative, formal, or functional —which define CSOs as

different from the state (market and family), reflect the directly observable relationship between governmental or governance institutions and citizens 'agency.

For initial analyses, such conceptions are useful for selecting organizations and practices to be analyzed as civil society actors. However, they overlook deeper relationships between the state and civil society because they do not address a central question in analyzing state–citizen relations: how do authoritarian regimes extend their authority over CSOs and construct parallel structures in times of crisis?

To answer this question, I adopt Azmi Beshara's critical conceptualization of civil society. He states:

> Overall, it is now clear that civil society, as a contractual community between individuals, has emerged in the public squares in its clearest form, in tension not only with the state that relies on coercion, but also with the state that has abandoned its function as a state. This occurred after the public sphere was turned into a private one through the emergence and practice of ruling families and the transformation of the public domain into their private estate. Civil society has manifested in the struggle of the masses with the state to restore it to the public sphere, and the buds of citizenship have begun to bloom in political action. However, at its core, it demands a state that acts like a state, not as private property (2012, 11).

Beshara continues that in conflict zones, citizenship will also struggle for its survival against two main adversaries: first, external intervention that undermines sovereignty, where civil society

appears outwardly as a sovereign nation; and second, attempts to revive tribalism and regionalism in the competition among political elites (ibid., 11-13). The public sphere and the private sphere develop independently when the former does not solely become assimilated with the state, and the latter does not solely become assimilated with the family. This means that there is a meaning to these definitions that goes beyond the state and the family. The public sphere is not limited to its beginnings as an abstraction from the state; rather, it is a liberation from identification with the state and has developed its own life around it. Similarly, the private sphere is an abstraction from the family, but it has liberated itself from identification with it and has become an independent concept that may be associated with an individual or with a "private" institution. In its relationship with the public sphere, this is civil society (ibid., 56).

The complexities of defining civil society in an authoritarian context stem from the authoritarian regime's flexibility in adapting itself to confront challenges and social movements, such as the peaceful demonstrations in Syria in early 2011. As Steven Heydemann states, it is a modified authoritarian regime whose survival comes from its ability to devise new legitimization strategies, not just from its excessive use of violence and overwhelming dominance over all forms of life. For instance, both SARC and STD on their public websites, identify themselves as national non-profit organizations aiming to provide assistance to ‘local communities’ (*al-mujtama'at al-mahalliyya*) and ‘individuals’ (*afrad*). As such, labeling these organizations as "national" implies that they are affiliated with the political authority in Syria, represented by its ruling members. This alignment with authority undermines the foundation upon which civil society is built, as an entity that is materially and administratively independent. It is evident from the definitions of these two organizations that they address "individuals" and "local communities" and do not recognize any civil organizations. Considering civil society as arising

from voluntary and willing contracts between these formations and individuals, it is possible to define "society" in Syria as an involuntary contract with the ruling authority. In this regard, under authoritarian regimes, the establishment of these non-profit organizations becomes an "escape" from achieving democracy. In this context, these civil formations can be defined as embodying the contemporary concept of civil society, which combines elements of modernity and primitive romanticism as an intimate social alternative to the modern state, with an emphasis on national and cultural particularity.

This brings me to Gramsci's notion of civil society and hegemony. He argues that the primary concern does not revolve around whether a strong state is desirable; in fact, he is even more dedicated to reducing the state's coercive power than the most strict libertarians (1971). However, Gramsci acknowledges that coercion and force are not the only, nor the most effective, means of societal control and subordination . He delves into aspects of the state and, particularly, civil society that liberal theory tends to avoid—specifically, the power and influence dynamics between political society (what liberals refer to as "government" or "state") and civil society (the "private sector" in liberal terms), which reinforce each other to benefit certain groups, strata, and institutions. For Gramsci, civil society is better understood not as a realm of freedom, but of hegemony. Hegemony relies on consent rather than coercion, but this consent is not a natural result of "free choice"; it is manufactured through intricate mediums, various institutions, and constantly evolving processes. Moreover, the ability to manufacture consent is not equally distributed in society. Not everyone is equally capable of understanding how consent is created, and some remain oblivious to the fact that consent is manufactured, believing instead that they freely and spontaneously give their own consent.

The position of a ruling class is more secure when it combines dominance in political society with hegemony in civil society. Gramsci explains in Notebook 4, section 38, that to achieve this, the ruling class must sacrifice its narrow corporate self-interest and move beyond economic and political control to establish "intellectual and moral unity, not on a corporate but on a universal level—the hegemony of a fundamental social group over the subordinate groups." For this to happen, the governmental apparatus must, to some extent, appear to rise above immediate class interests:

> The state-government is seen as a group's own organism for creating a favorable terrain for the maximum expansion of the group itself. But this development and this expansion are also viewed concretely as universal; that is, they are seen as being tied to the interests of the subordinate groups, as a development of unstable equilibriums between the interests of fundamental groups and the interests of subordinate groups in which the interests of the fundamental group prevail—but only up to a certain point; that is, without descending into corporate economic selfishness.

One interpretation points out that by exercising restraint, the government apparatus actually reinforces and extends the ruling groups' hold on power over the whole of society. In the context of Syria, this extension of hegemony highlights the fact that civil society is not just a zone of freedom from coercion or sanctioned violence but also the sphere of hegemony, the terrain of power exercised by one group over others.

Gramsci's conceptualization of the relationship between the ruling class and civil society oscillates between control and hegemony. According to Gramsci, achieving a hegemonic position within civil society is ultimately more crucial for the ruling class than merely controlling

the juridico-political apparatus of government. While control over civil society allows dominant interest groups to impose their will by force if necessary, relying solely on this source of power would leave them vulnerable to a coup d'état. Hegemony, in contrast, insures the dominant groups against the consequences of a coup d'état and likely prevents a successful coup from occurring in the first place. Gramsci does not suggest that the growth of civil society, which typically accompanies the expansion of a dominant group's power from the economic and political spheres to society as a whole, is inherently detrimental to subaltern social groups. The struggle against domination must be rooted in a carefully formulated counterhegemonic conception of the social order, the dissemination of such a conception, and the formation of counterhegemonic institutions—which can only occur within civil society and require its expansion (Notebook 3, section119).

In the case of Syria, the regime's expansion of power goes beyond mere hegemony and control to a form of parallelization, where organizations like the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) and the Syria Trust for Development (STD) become embodiments of state power in terms of their legislation, dissemination of funds, and authority over active Syrian communities. These communities endeavored to respond actively to the disaster following the earthquake but were coerced and prevented by the regime. The next section will demonstrate how the network of these two organizations operated in the aftermath of the earthquake. This analysis focuses on understanding how the Syrian regime's governance becomes synonymous with SARC and STD, where differentiation is not decisive. The subsequent section on the history and operations of these two organizations in the aftermath of the earthquake will elucidate this point.

The Syrian Arab Red Crescent and the Syria Trust for Development: A Brief of Past and Post-2023 Earthquake

In the aftermath of the earthquake, the Syrian regime strategically leveraged the natural disaster to re-affirm its authority over the local population through actors embedded in its power structure (Al-Jabassini 2020). On the one hand, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) and Syria Trust for Development (STD) became focal points of charitable donations and humanitarian efforts in affected areas, further reaffirming the role of regime's power structures in the humanitarian arena. On the other hand, the regime capitalized on international sanctions, using them as an excuse to tighten domestic economic control and propagate the narrative that sanctions were the primary cause of the Syrian people's hardships. Moreover, during the crisis, the Syrian regime strategically leveraged the situation to advance its agenda of promoting regional integration and political normalization. The earthquake became a transformational moment in Syria's political landscape that highlights regime's authoritarian adaptability in which the disaster was instrumentalized as a tool to shore up its external legitimacy. In Syria, the Assad regime was quick to respond to these potentials, both by seeking to control the flow of aid and by seeking to convince the population that they had been abandoned by the international community. By channeling the suffering and anger of Syrians into outrage against external sanctions, Assad sought to position his regime as their only source of empowerment and hope. This is a continuation of a long-standing situation in Syria in which the regime has sought to undermine civil society and usurp all such functions to the state. The overwhelming dominance of the STD and SARC is a primary example of this trend. For example, STD after its formation, the Trust took administrative control of a wide swath of non-governmental organizations and civic groups,

while threatening the licenses of organizations that did not accede to join it. Syrian civic organizations that continue to operate outside of the Trust are small and few in number, and those that lack ties to the regime suffer constant scrutiny and interference (Hinnebusch 1993).

Starting with the historical and political background of SARC is essential to uncover the intricate and complex web of dynamics between the survival of authoritarianism and civil organizations. **Before the Ba'ath Party took power,** The "Syrian Arab Red Crescent " (SARC) was established by Republican Decree No. 540 issued on May 30, 1942 (*SARC*). In 1943, the association was registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor as a non-governmental organization without official status, as the "Red Cross," established by France, was performing its duties in Syria. In 1946, specifically on April 2nd, the administrative body of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent decided to negotiate with the International Red Cross and seek affiliation. On June 20th of the same year, the association received recognition from the International Committee of the Red Cross (Murdam Bek 2019). **After the Ba'ath Party took power i**n 1965, the Red Crescent was officially recognized, and following its declaration of adherence to the seven principles, it joined the Red Cross and Red Crescent. In 1966, three years after the Ba'ath Party took power, a republican decree was issued to re-establish the Red Crescent and organize its work directly under the authority of the party's regime. The organization established healthcare facilities to provide free medical and relief services, declared its mission to respond to emergencies and disasters at the national level, and defined itself as a "humanitarian organization with financial and administrative independence and legal personality." The organization has more than 12,000 volunteers across all provinces (*Jusoor* 2018). It has 14 main branches and 75 sub-branches distributed throughout Syrian provinces, each with its own internal system and governing body, including elected

management councils at the branch and general levels, an executive office, and a president. The organization also has several permanent non-elected committees stemming from the branches, such as the social committee, media committee, international humanitarian law committee, ladies' committee, and human resources committee. However, one of the most prominent and largest of these committees is the "Youth Committee," responsible for volunteers aged 18 to 30. The Youth Committee further branches into specialized departments, including disaster management, ambulance services, psychological support, health, and environment departments. Despite its humanitarian mission and calls for respecting human rights, the organization has not been able to escape the influence of government institutions in Syria.

The former president of the organization, Abdul Rahman Al-Attar, remained in his position for approximately 35 years, and the current president, Khaled Haboubati, was appointed by a decision from the regime's government. Branch council elections in 2011 were indefinitely postponed, and appointees were selected based on loyalty to the regime and the approval of security agencies (Subh, *Syria TV* 2023). Branch presidents and boards of directors generally reflect the sectarian and demographic majority in their respective provinces. The regime benefited more from this composition in its loyal areas. In opposition-held areas, the opposition also benefited, as members, in their personal capacities, participated in providing healthcare and humanitarian aid to those in need, leading to their deaths or arrests, especially in the Homs, Daraa, and Damascus countryside branches (ibid). **However, before 2011 t**he Syrian government utilized this organization as a mechanism to control humanitarian efforts in Syria. For example, all non-governmental organizations seeking to operate in Syria were required to sign a memorandum of understanding with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and obtain its approval for activities and

shipments (*Pro-Justice* 2019). The role of security agencies within the Syrian Arab Red Crescent was previously described as traditional and non-influential.

With the start of protests in 2011, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent continued its activities as usual in most provinces. However, the branches in Latakia, Tartus, and Hama refused to respond to calls for the ambulance service for the injured in the protests, under orders from the heads of the organization's branches in those provinces. The Aleppo and Damascus branches, along with some other branches, recorded limited responses (ibid). The government took measures to ensure the loyalty of the leadership of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent to the government by freezing Red Crescent elections indefinitely in 2011. **At the same time,** security forces and government-aligned militias began targeting Red Crescent ambulances while attempting to rescue injured protesters. Local teams received instructions to limit their operations in opposition-controlled and contested areas. When Red Crescent first-aid teams reached neighborhoods under opposition control, they received orders to transport the injured to government-run hospitals. Reports of widespread violations against patients emerged, with some patients being denied medical treatment and subjected to torture by nurses and doctors. Many were also arrested directly from hospitals by security forces (ibid).

The branch of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent in Idlib, headed by Mamoun Kharbout, along with its two sub-branches in Maarat al-Numan and Salqin, continued to operate even after the opposition took control of the province. It did not face closure or freezing by the Damascus administration but came under intense pressure from both the regime and armed factions in control of Idlib. From the regime's side, humanitarian aid, especially food and medical supplies, significantly decreased, becoming very scarce. Meanwhile, the Army of Conquest "جيش الفتح"

factions dealt with this branch with great suspicion and did not allow it to receive relief materials from the regime. They threatened to close it down several times, but local residents defended it due to its limited services. Later, it received assistance from its Turkish counterpart, making the branch and its leader wanted by the regime (*Jusoor* 2018).

The Syrian Center for Justice and Accountability obtained government documents showing clear orders from intelligence agencies to their branches to work closely with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent "to organize the distribution of medical aid to areas 'under opposition control' and to select the types of aid that can be delivered" (*Pro-Justice* 2019). In 2012, the Syrian regime established the "Supreme Relief Committee" under the supervision of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor. Its tasks included coordinating between humanitarian organizations operating in Syria, with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent at the forefront, to tighten its control over humanitarian work and aid. The regime also required the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) to concentrate all its operations in Damascus. Furthermore, the Syrian regime demanded that all UN agencies and humanitarian organizations sign agreements and memoranda of understanding with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, stipulating the prohibition of providing relief aid, field visits, and humanitarian programs without the organization's permission (Subh, S*yria TV*, 2023).

Number of arrests took place by the regime to sustain full security over SARC. For example, in 2012, the regime arrested Raed al-Taweel from his workplace in Abu Rumanah. Al-Taweel had served as the Director of the Ambulance Department in the Red Crescent and had volunteered with the organization for over 18 years (*Al Joumhouria* 2023). In 2014, the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS), a coalition of Syrian medical relief organizations, warned that approximately 90 to 95% of humanitarian aid sent to Syria through the Red Crescent was stored

in government warehouses and redirected to support the regime's army and militias. The organization denied these allegations, considering them "false, misleading, and unconfirmed." A report published by Foreign Affairs magazine stated that the Syrian Arab Red Crescent indirectly contributed to supporting the Syrian regime with around $30 billion in international aid funds through its humanitarian efforts. The organization was used as a gateway to access these funds and was instrumental in paying salaries to regime personnel and supporting its security apparatus (Sparrow, *Foreign Affairs*, 2018). In 2020, 15 humanitarian, health, and human rights organizations, including the Aleppo Health Directorate, announced their categorical refusal to deal with the Red Crescent or to accept aid through it until it returned to the internationally recognized seven humanitarian principles (Khudur, *Al-Araby*, 2016).

In a study conducted by the Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, it was mentioned that the Syrian Arab Red Crescent played a key role in diverting humanitarian aid in Syria to the Syrian regime. Security and military elements were included at all levels of the organization's operations. The study also revealed that the Syrian regime used United Nations aid to support its army, security forces, and allied militias through Red Crescent operations. This means that international and UN aid provided a lifeline to the regime's economy, supervised by the Red Crescent, in the face of imposed sanctions. The study also noted that the Red Crescent manages all its humanitarian convoys and trucks under the supervision of security branches, particularly the Political Security and Military Security branches. Coordination is carried out with checkpoint personnel, who have the authority to obtain whatever they want from the trucks (Tsurkov and Jukhadar 2020).

As for the leadership and operations of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) both before and after 2011, the organization witnessed many shifts in terms of its internal structure since the eruption of 2011 protests. For example, the former president of SARC, Abdel Rahman Attar, was reportedly forced to resign in 2016, with some speculating that this was due to his unwillingness to fully comply with government demands (*Pro-Justice* 2019). A change in the organization's internal regulations in 2016 allowed the Prime Minister to select and appoint the president of SARC, leading to the appointment of Khaled Hboubati. Khaled Hboubati, the current president of SARC, is a prominent businessman with close ties to the government. His father-in-law previously served as the head of the Business Council in Damascus (Black, *The Guardian* 2011). **On the other hand,** Abdel Rahman Attar's tenure was marred by allegations of corruption and nepotism, as he served alongside the Syrian regime for 35 years, from 1981 until his resignation in 2016. Critics accuse him of using his position for economic monopolies and allowing the security apparatuses to use SARC facilities for detaining and torturing detainees during the Syrian uprising. A leaked document from 2008 revealed that Attar acted as a financial and business front for Bashar al-Assad's cousin, Rami Makhlouf, with the specific mission of evading sanctions and facilitating the establishment of an aviation company (Subh, *Syria TV,* 2023). **In this context,** Khaled Hboubati's appointment as the president of SARC in 2016 raised concerns as he was not a member of the executive board, the board of directors, or any of its personnel. These details shed light on the complex relationship between SARC and the Syrian government, including allegations of corruption and misuse of humanitarian resources.

While SARC is affiliated with the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, it has close ties to the STD and with the oversight of the regime (*SYRIA TV* 2020). The Syrian Trust

for Development was established in 2007 by Asma al-Assad, the "First Lady," to become one of the most valuable public relations projects within the Syrian regime (Ahmad, *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed* 2023). Asma al-Assad merged several non-governmental organizations under the Syrian Trust for Development, such as "Youth Entrepreneurs Association," "International Youth Chamber," and "Basma Association for Supporting Children with Cancer" (Mansour, *Al-Jumhuriyya* 2017). The purpose of the "STD" was to showcase the civilian aspect of the Assad-led Syria and promote a new, inclusive, and modern image to attract foreign capital for investment in Syria. STD became one of the most financially and human resource-rich Syrian non-governmental organizations, marketing itself as a hub for all sectors of civil society by 2010. **STD is divided into 4 departments:**

- Human Resources: It established what was known as "Work Clinics," which offered courses on human resources, computer, and language skills, creating resumes, and requirements for working in major companies. It also sent personnel on trips to European countries to learn from large companies' operations and gain experience.
- Research and Media: This department presented what was known as the "Intangible Heritage Project for Syria" to UNESCO.
- External Relations: Became one of the most active departments after 2011.
- Financial Affairs.

These departments convene in a Board of Trustees chaired by Asma al-Assad, comprising 17 directors of Trust entities at the national level (ibid). STD governed few projects such as:

- "Work Clinics Project": Located in the "Abu Rumana" area in Damascus, it offered courses in human resources, computer skills, languages, resume building, and requirements for

working in major companies. It also sent staff on trips to European countries to learn from large companies' operations and gain experience.

- " Wardat Masar Project": Targeted individuals aged 5 to 21 and aimed to create a generation interested in music and theater, along with proficiency in modern communication tools, under the vision set by the Chairman of the Association's Board of Directors, Asma al-Assad.
- "Syrian Rural Development Fund": Provided small interest-free loans to farmers in rural areas of Hama, Latakia, Tartus, and southern Syria.

The Syrian Trust for Development was licensed by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor as a non-governmental and non-profit organization in accordance with Law 93 of 1958. According to the law, these associations are prohibited from engaging in military or political activities. However, the Trust engaged in various activities supportive of the Syrian regime, such as mobilizing pro-regime rallies, media initiatives to reshape the regime's image, and other supportive activities for the army. The General Trust faced several conflicts with figures from security agencies who opposed the organization's work and its pre-2011 openness. On multiple occasions, it was rumored that the head of the Air Force Intelligence, Jameel al-Hassan, requested the closure or restriction of the Trust's activities (see Mansour, *Al-Jumhuriyya* 2017). In September 2011, Asma al-Assad met with several coordinators of the Trust and requested its restructuring, including the exclusion of individuals she did not trust in terms of loyalty.

Before 2011, Asma al-Assad was striving to establish a civil institution that aimed to transcend the military context that had colored Syria for three decades. However, all of this quickly faded after the launch of the Syrian revolution against the Assad regime. The Trust transformed

from an institution seeking to create space for civil work according to the regime's perspective to an institution aiming to whitewash the regime's image in both its security and military aspects. As the years of the revolution passed, the Trust began to play an international role following the isolation imposed on the Assad regime by Western countries and institutions. The Trust managed to forge international partnerships with the United Nations, the Norwegian Refugee Council, and gained recognition by UNESCO for the first time in 2012 (*STD* 2021). The Trust successfully positioned itself as a social cover for the regime through various programs it adopted and supported, such as the early recovery initiatives and the "*Jarih Al-Watan*" program, which focuses on monitoring and supporting the wounded from the regime's forces and army (*SANA News* 2021). As the name implies, this campaign is strongly infused with loyalist rhetoric and propaganda. It was directly overseen by Asma al-Assad and has assisted in organizing emergency response activities to provide injured soldiers healthcare and rehabilitation (STD, Jarih al-Watan). Additionally, the Trust established a prosthetics installation office at "Hamish" Hospital in Damascus, where artificial limbs are fitted for the wounded from the regime's forces. This effort is accompanied by promotional media materials aimed at gaining support and sympathy from both the domestic and international public opinion.

The activities of the Trust did not stop at this point; it managed to become the partner through which the work of non-governmental organizations, which were halted from operating independently within the regime's territories, is coordinated. Thus, the STD transformed into the regime's watchful eye overseeing humanitarian work within its areas, as well as the security arm guiding the operations of these organizations in a manner that serves a significant portion of the regime's support base. Moreover, the trust managed to secure grants from the United Nations

totaling more than 6 million dollars during the years 2016, 2017, and 2018. Its role became prominent in Assad's efforts to circumvent the sanctions imposed on him after 2019, whether due to the Caesar Act or European sanctions.

In an interview with the New Arab, researcher Sinan Hatahet emphasized that the role of the Trust is encapsulated in controlling social affairs through the guise of civil society management. This is achieved either by seizing UN aid, given their partnership, or indirectly by regulating the movements of the Syrian Red Crescent. This became particularly evident after the earthquake and internationally funded early recovery projects. Additionally, the Trust took charge of relations with international organizations, as they began to engage more with Syria. Hatahet further clarified that the Trust's work involves organizing and managing these activities to gain control over key decision points within the state. Furthermore, it directly and discreetly oversees the collection of contributions in the form of taxes from businesspersons, channeling them towards the presidential palace. Businessmen are compelled to pay annual dues ranging from $200,000 to $1 million, deposited for the benefit of the presidential palace and the "General Secretariat for Development." He also pointed out the emergence of a new class of entrepreneurs directly associated with the Assad family's names, such as Yasar Ibrahim and Abu Ali Khudr, along with others who maintain indirect connections with the network (Ahmad, *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed,* 2023).

In July 2023, wildfires erupted in forests in the northern part of Latakia province. The role of the Trust became evident as it announced that its teams continued to assist affected families in villages adjacent to the areas hit by the fires. They worked "in cooperation with active bodies on the ground to secure emergency relief supplies for the residents." However, what was noteworthy was the explicit accusations made by some locals in the region, directly blaming this institution for the wildfires in the coastal region and other areas, like Old Damascus. These accusations

suggest that the fires were ignited to compel residents to sell their lands and properties. Allegedly, agents of the STD and representatives from Iran would then buy these properties at significantly lower prices. These accusations were accompanied by other allegations that targeted Asma Al Assad and several close associates, claiming that they established a secret chamber to control all aspects of the economy. One of these individuals is Fares Kallas, who holds the position of Secretary-General of the Syrian Trust of Development.

The STD continued to receive a great deal of international recognition and contributions even after the regime's brutal suppression of civil protests and the outbreak of war in 2011. For example, the UNESCO has accredited the STD as an expert body on safeguarding intangible heritages—the only such designated organization in the Middle East (*UN Watch* 2020). A great deal of criticism has been levelled at the STD due to its lack of transparency and close ties to the Assad family; many commentators regard it as little more than a funding arm of the Syrian regime (ibid). Furthermore, the STD has taken on many responsibilities that would normally default to state institutions. For example, the STD reported the numbers of Syrians impacted by the war in various locations, identifying local health needs, issuing new identification papers to people who have lost them, and assessing damages to homes. At the same time, the STD enjoys robust links with state institutions in terms of funding and promotion. For example, Syria's Ministry of Endowment (*Awqaf*) has used mosques to collect donations for the STD. Furthermore, the media coverage of relief efforts in state-run media has predominantly focused on the activities of the STD, while neglecting the limited involvement of government ministries in the humanitarian arena.

In the wake of the February earthquake, the STD effectively served as a parallel government, while retaining a diaphanous veneer of independence that allows contributors to maintain that they are not donating directly to the Syrian regime. The STD launched an appeal for donations and sought to position itself as a primary conduit of international aid. However, both the exact number of financial contributions and the transparency regarding the allocation of funds remained inadequately reported. Furthermore, the STD actively participated in conducting evacuation of affected population and facilitated the receipt of some material aid through border crossings, albeit in limited quantities. It took on the responsibilities of collecting comprehensive data on the human impacts of the earthquake and assessing urgent health needs within the affected communities. Moreover, the STD evaluated the structural stability of buildings in the impacted regions, distributed essential rations and food supplies to cater to the immediate needs of the displaced individuals, and provided support by issuing new identification papers for the afflicted. In spite of that, the STD did not provide an effective on-the-ground response, and there is much uncertainty as to how the donations that it received were actually used.

The SARC, on the other side, played a pivotal role in providing essential medical treatment for the injured in the aftermath of the disaster, directly distributing material aid to individuals in need, and tracked missing persons and reuniting families. It has been the main recipient of international material donations, arriving through airports and land crossings with Lebanon and Jordan. This aid has been copious; in the three weeks after the earthquake the SARC reported receiving more than 3,000 tons of food and medicines.[ii] That said, the SARC does not maintain robust public records about the destinations or distribution of these materials. Many Syrians who are critical of the regime believe that the aid materials have mostly been selectively diverted to

profit the regime-held affected areas or, at the very least, that relief supplies were distributed inequitably. The claims of earthquake relief materials being sold in Damascus markets, which include European goods and uncommon food items not usually found in Syria, have exacerbated the existing accusations (*Al-Jazeera* 2023b). In this context, both entities, STD and SARC, have become central junctures for large portions of international aid and foreign humanitarian organisations registered in Damascus, particularly after the earthquake in February 2023. Furthermore, the bulk of the international assistance is directed through these two organisations. This has permitted the Syrian regime to enforce its regulation over assistance operations and programs within the country, and therefore strengthen the state's authority by controlling international humanitarian funds and manipulating humanitarian assistance through the actions of the SARC and STD.

Conclusion

Following the eruption of the Syrian war in 2011, the regime took active measures to reconfigure its power structures and solidify control over its territories. These measures became more pronounced after the regime recaptured large swathes of territory in 2018, extending beyond political and security spheres to the humanitarian domain. Within this sphere, the Syria Trust for Development (STD) and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) emerged as prominent actors, playing significant roles in addressing the aftermath of the February 2023 earthquake by providing support and assistance to populations residing in regime-held affected areas.

This article has examined how the Syrian regime leveraged the devastating earthquake of February 2023 to reaffirm its authority and legitimacy. By analyzing the regime's strategic responses, particularly the roles played by SARC and STD, the study reveals the complexities of

governance and control in an authoritarian context. The concept of the 'parallel state' has been central to understanding how seemingly independent civil society organizations can function as extensions of state power, manipulating humanitarian aid and international narratives to maintain regime stability.

The findings highlight that in the aftermath of natural disasters, authoritarian regimes like Syria’s can effectively manipulate crises to reinforce their control and legitimacy. The regime's use of nationalist rhetoric, control over aid distribution, and exploitation of international sanctions discourse demonstrate how disasters can be politicized to serve authoritarian ends. This reinforces the notion that the survival of authoritarian regimes is not merely a function of their governance capabilities but also their ability to adapt and construct parallel state structures to maintain power.

Ultimately, this article contributes to the ongoing discourse on authoritarianism, governance, and civil society by demonstrating the nuanced and strategic ways in which regimes can navigate and exploit crises. It calls for a more critical examination of the roles and functions of civil society organizations in authoritarian settings and their potential complicity in reinforcing authoritarian durability. The regime's response to the February 2023 earthquake illustrates its strategic use of natural disasters to reinforce authority and legitimacy. By controlling humanitarian aid through SARC and STD, the regime has bolstered its material and ideological control over the population. This raises questions about the evolution of civil society under authoritarian regimes and the broader implications for international aid and governance. Hence, the concept of the 'parallel state' provides a useful framework for analyzing how regimes can create and utilize alternative structures of power to sustain their rule. Future research could benefit from applying

this framework to other authoritarian contexts to further explore the interplay between state control, civil society, and crisis management.

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